Tells the Facts and Names the Names

CounterPunch

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There's nothing "natural" about the awful disaster of Hurricane Mitch. Those thousands of lives were lost to mud, water, hunger, disease though human agency. Hillsides dissolved and shanty towns vanished in the floodwaters because of economic and political policies, mostly imposed at the point of a gun.

If you want to pick a date when the fate of those thousands of poor people was sealed, it wasn't when Hurricane Mitch began to pick up speed off the coast of Honduras. It came forty-four years ago, in 1954, when the United Fruit Company, now renamed Chiquita Banana, prodded the CIA to take action against the moderately left government of President Jacobo Arbenz in Guatemala. Arbenz had compulsorily purchased vast unused stretches of productive land held by United Fruit, and was planning to redistribute it to poor peasants.

A CIA-organized coup was not long coming. Guatemala entered its long night. Along with Arbenz vanished all prospect of land reform, not merely in Guatemala but throughout Central America. Instead, pressed most urgently by the Kennedy administration, came the so-called "export model" of development, designed to combat the example of the Cuban revolution by fostering growth throughout Latin America.

Through the next 30 years in Central America small peasants were pushed off their traditional holdings by local oligarchs flush with money and military equipment furnished by the United States. The peasants had no option but to migrate to forested hillsides too steep to be of interest to oligarchs and foreign companies who had seized the bottom lands. Year after year the peasants tried to ward off starvation, raising subsistence crops on slopes so extreme that sometimes, in photographs from El Salvador, one comes across a peasant working his land while tied to a stake, so he won't slip. In such manner the trees got cut down and the land worked and overworked, until a tropical storm would send the bare hillsides careening down in deadly mudslides.

Tens of thousands of other peasant families, forced off the good land, moved into Managua or Tegucigalpa or other towns and cities. The consequent shanty towns burgeoned along river banks, on precarious flood basins where at least the inhabitants had access to water. As with the degraded hillsides, these shanty towns were deathtraps, awaiting the inevitable.

There were plenty of auguries and warnings, as Daniel Faber, who teaches at Northeastern University in Boston and who wrote the excellent Environment Under Fire: Ecological Crisis in Central America, describes to CounterPunch. In 1982 a mudslide on Monte Bello in El Salvador killed over a thousand displaced peasants who had moved there and deforested the mountain slopes to grow food and get fuel. In the mid-1980s the US Agency for International Development reported that across 5.5 million acres in Honduras, the soil was eroding at an average rate of 40 to 200 metric tons per acre a year. Geology and social displacement tell us the cause. In Honduras more than 75 per cent of the land has slopes greater than 25 per cent. The steeper slopes were all that the peasants were allowed to farm, though the terrain is entirely unsuited to agriculture. As Faber points out, the fragile Choluteca Valley and the western hills bordering on Honduras and Nicaragua don't have much suitable land, but the entire zone is occupied by small farmers,

(**Mitch** *continued on page 6)*

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Our Little Secret

The Right Guys Lost

Ahoy there, Newtie! Don't say we didn't warn you, your fellow Republicans and the press, which always inflated your mediocre talents. In sharp distinction to almost every political hack in America, we said, right here, before the November 3 vote, that the Republicans had definitively screwed themselves in September with their obsession to impeach Bill, and that the voters were going to say loud and clear, Enough. So it came to pass. We said that the fateful moment was the release of Bill's grand jury testimony, which you were a prime force in engineering. And so it was. We said that the mad-dog right, the Wall Street Journal editorial crowd, John Fund, Bill Kristol, Bill Bennett and their foot soldiers in the House, had become so demented in their hatred of Bill Clinton that they could no longer see straight, could no longer read with power of rational comprehension the message of every poll since last January.

If ever there was a safe bet, it's the one a CounterPunch co-editor has with the editor of the New York Press, Russ Smith, that Bill Clinton will survive in office till the end of his term. Of course Smith may yet score his $750 for other reasons. The Commander-in-Chief could choke on a Big Mac or, at current time of writing, get so swollen with glee that he explodes. But impeachment will not bring him down.

So it is possible to take pleasure in the people's vote. The people voted decisively against the Puritans, the window-peepers, the Robert Borks, the George Wills. And that's sound reason to exult.

Farewell, foul Newt! Both the right and the liberals have lost a truly great fundraiser. The corporations poured money into your treasure chest. You had an unerring talent for making the CEOs feel they were in touch with the 21st Century, and of course that you were the source of endless juice in Washington.

In this last race, you raised over $6 million against an invisible opposition, and one big question now is: Who gets that loot? And liberals too raised millions on scare ads, featuring Newt the Beast.

Truth is, you were never much of a threat, and you were never that smart. You had the intellectual depth of a Forbes editorial and a libido even more rampant than Bill's. The people always had you figured out as a scam artist. Even in your own district. Back in 1990, if Speaker of the House Tom Foley hadn't denied campaign funds to your opponent in Georgia, you would undoubtedly have lost.

The press always got you wrong, and the New York Times for November 7 was no exception, with a ridiculous piece by Rick Bragg, under the headline "Disappointment Greets News of Gingrich, Symbol of Independence in His Self-Reliant District." Self-reliant? Your district is a gigantic sewer of federal boondoggles, so deep and noisome that even the Joint Chiefs of Staff in congressional testimony not so long ago were moved to protest. At one point your district ran third nationwide as recipient of federal gravy, after the Space Center and Arlington, Virginia.

So goodbye, Newton! And good riddance! You were brought down ultimately by your participation in one of the great political misjudgments of all time, culminating in the election results of a week ago.

And in that election, of course, mostly the wrong guys won. Guys like Charles Schumer. Will it be possible, 100 years hence, to look back on November 3, 1998, and state that his victory over D'Amato was a benchmark, a turning point, even a slight tilt in the struggle against corruption and injustice? Of course not. From Point Reyes to Montauk, from the Upper Peninsula to Corpus Christi, corporate power sustained scarcely a scratch, let alone a dent.

The Bad Guys Won

In California, there was an effort, Proposition 9, to roll back an astonishing victory by the big utilities in 1996 whereby consumers have been stuck with the bill for all the wrong bets — most notably nuclear power — made by these same utilities in years gone by. Prop 9 was an effort to undo this chicanery. The utilities threw $40 million into the fray against it. They wheeled on recipients of their largesse — a "consumer advocate" called David Horowitz and some tame enviro groups like the Environmental Defense Fund, the National Resources Defense Council and the truly awful Planning and Conservation League. They won, big time.

This saga began at midnight on the last day of the session in Sacramento in September 1996, when the legislators snuck through a self-serving package written by a utility executive who had briefly joined the staff of the utilities' favorite politician in the state capitol, named Steve Peace, another demonstration of the bipartisan nature of evil. Peace is a Democrat who represents the California state senate district north of San Diego, normally dominated by Republicans. However, the utilities have apparently convinced the Republican Party (recipient of more than $500,000 in utility campaign contributions) not to fund a serious challengers to Peace's seat. Thus the Democrat is virtually assured of keeping his hold on the seat as long as he carries water for the utilities.

Peace's background is as a producer of bad movies, most notoriously the dreadful camp horror flick "Attack of the Killer Tomatoes". Peace has kept his finger in the movie business as a part owner of a media company called "Four Square Productions". This company was paid nearly $80,000 by the utilities to make TV spots attacking Prop. 9 as an assault on consumer choice.

Wins for Trout and Pigs

Those looking for a glimmer of sunshine on this dark horizon can lift up their

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eyes to Montana, where good organizing produced a victory that will be of particular comfort to those who love fly-fishing and McLean's A River Runs Through It, or saw Robert Redford's movie of that novella. The river in question is the Blackfoot, menaced in recent years by the prospects of a goldmine, a quarter of a mile deep, in which the ore would be processed by the cyanide heap leach process, which would ensure a bleak prospect for the Blackfoot and all living creatures therein. November 3 saw the triumph of an initiative on the Montana ballot banning all new cyanide leach mining.

A little farther east, in South Dakota, there was another successful initiative. This time it was targeted against corporate hog farms. Indeed, November 3 was good for porkers equipped with four feet as well as two. In North Carolina a great enemy of the pig was Lauch Faircloth, Republican senator. There was many a corporate hog farm in the state where pigs, headed for their doom, squealed out one last curse on Faircloth's name. He was part owner of Coharie Farms, the 30th largest hog producer in the country. Faircloth owned more than $1 million worth of stock in two slaughterhouses. In Congress he attended to the interests of the pig men as chairman of the Senate subcommittee on Clean Water, Wetlands, Private Property and Nuclear Safety. Faircloth went down.

That's more or less it. In 1998, whether their servants be Bill Clinton, Al Gore, Newt Gingrich or Bob Livingston, the corporations rule. But even so, there were some other rays of sunshine, too pale as yet to suggest a new dawn, but cheering nonetheless.

GOOD GUYS

In Dallas on November 8 CounterPuncher Alexander Cockburn gave the keynote address to the annual convention of the Fully Informed Jury Association, which campaigns for a jury's right, imbued in the Constitution, to "nullify"; that is, the right of a jury to be the judge of law as well as facts, and to have the power to set the instructions of the court aside. Thus, it was a particular pleasure on November 3 to see Norman Vroman surge to victory over the incumbent DA, Susan Massini, in California's Mendocino County by some 900 votes.

Back in June Vroman, who once served nine months in the federal pen for tax resistance, told CounterPunch, "When I'm elected DA I'll inform judges I want the fully informed jury instruction given in every criminal case, meaning the jury has the option of either following the law as the judge instructs them, or their own conscience, in which they can set aside the law." Vroman built up the sort of coalition that terrifies both conventional Democrats and Republicans, from the NRA at one end to the supporters of medical marijuana use at the other. Greens like his promise to go after big corporate polluters and ravishers of nature. His philosophy of law enforcement is succinct: "Among people who get arrested, there are two distinct groups. In one group are the hardened criminals who plan their crimes and prey on society. In the other group are the lawbreakers — the citizens stumbling along in life who somehow run afoul of the law. I will have no mercy on criminals. The lawbreakers will be approached with the focus of making them aware of what caused them to run afoul of the law and prevent that from happening again."

North Carolina's pigs, headed for their doom, squealed out a last curse on Faircloth's name.

Neither Vroman nor the newly elected Sheriff, Tony Craver, a former deputy who also favors the decriminalization of marijuana, would have won, over the opposition of the entire county establishment and its newspapers, had they not enjoyed the raucous support of the Anderson Valley Advertiser, the North Coast's, indeed California's prime newspaper of opposition. So is there a national paradigm here, at least in germination?

There is no longer any coherent conservative philosophy of any mass appeal here in the United States. In early October The New York Times Magazine published Andrew Sullivan's acerbic and efficient demolition of conservatism's recent itinerary in the hands of the parlor moralists William Kristol, Rev. Richard John Neuhaus, Michael Novak, Mark Helprin, William Bennett and Robert Bork.

As Sullivan concluded, "Thus modern conservatism, which began as a movement of personal liberation from the state and intellectual skepticism in response to ideological certainty, has become its precise opposite. Convinced that society is in moral and cultural peril, the most influential conservative intellectuals have made their peace with big government, censorship and the presence of sectarian dogma in politics. The blithe optimism of Reagan, the joy that conservatives once took in the sheer unpredictability of a free people in a free society, has been replaced by a dark dread of how people could misuse such freedom, and the desperate need to coerce them back into line."

Let's not get misty-eyed about Ronald Reagan, one of the most predictable corporate whores of all time, but Sullivan's analysis was mostly on target, particularly on the conclusion arrived at by the parlor moralists, as they confronted the fact that most Americans didn't care that much about Monica, or about Bill lying about her. Whining about "the death of outrage" the parlor moralists, Bill Bennett in the lead, are saying the American people have let America down.

When Sullivan dropped the other shoe, i.e., the sort of conservatism he favored, it came in the form of a paragraph about freedom, irreproachable in content, but spiritless. Unsurprisingly, Sullivan had nothing whatsoever to say about corporate power. In contrast to his flaying of the Kristol crowd, his own vision was pallid, akin to the decorous murmurs of those Republican "moderates" one used to encounter in the mid-1970s trying to beat back Sullivan's hero, Ronald Reagan.

So, if conservatism is void of any zestful political future unless as window dressing for the corporate agenda, and if left populism finds it hard to get airborne these days, as the failure of Prop 9 in California suggests, what are we left with? Vroman's victory is a tiny augury, and Jesse Ventura's amazing win in the race for the Minnesota governorship a bigger one.

ENTER JESSE VENTURA

A couple of nights after the election we talked to Steve Perry in Minneapolis. Steve is a smart fellow, who used to edit City Pages, before the Village Voice took it over, pushed Perry out and drained it of interest. Steve told us he'd been in Ventura's campaign hq on election night. The office was located in one of the dicier neighborhoods of the city's impoverished near north side, where three volunteers watched the returns on a 12-

("Enter Jesse" continued on page 4)

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Our Little Secret (cont.): *"The Body" Politic*

inch black & white portable TV at a time when the astounded Ventura was realizing that he was headed for victory, and when Mrs. Ventura was having an anxiety attack in consequence. In a back room the phones were ringing, with no one there to pick them up. Steve took a few calls and found the people on the other end certain that they would be able to talk to Ventura in person.

The biggest turnout in the nation was in Minnesota, at 60 percent-plus, 12 percent of whom said Ventura was the only reason they were voting at all. His support cut a broad swath through political convention. He won or tied in every age group except the over-60s (they went for the Democrat, Skip Humphrey) and carried every income bracket except the over-$100,000s (who supported the Republican, Norm Coleman). Twenty-eight percent of registered Republicans and a third of the Democrats voted for him. The closer one looks at the exit polls, the weirder the picture becomes. What, for instance, to make of the fact that Ventura earned his greatest pluralities among those making less than $15,000 a year and those making $50-75,000? In the end the clearest common denominator among Ventura voters was their loud dissent from the two-party system.

Ventura made a great vehicle for such dissent. Gruff and plainspoken in bearing, he came off during the campaign like a more garrulous, working class Ronald Reagan, with the same aw-shucks humor, the same rhetorical simplicity. His message: These career politicians don't understand and they don't care about you. I do.

Ventura, who calls himself a "small-l libertarian," sprawls all over the political map. Ventura says he would gladly repeal the federal Defense of Marriage Act. He supports abortion rights. He favors a moratorium on large feedlots. He's for loosening handgun permit rules. He supports a gang strikeforce and proposes decriminalizing drugs to sap the power of gangs. He opposes the federal death penalty but says Minnesota should have one as long as life sentences allow parole. He says Minnesota should consider new approaches to prostitution, including the possibility of legalizing it in a red-light district. He's against school vouchers, but also opposes new funding of college loans. He thinks Minnesota Care is "socialized medicine," and that private charities should help the poor.

Ventura's win is getting mixed readings from political pundits. In Salon, former Nation inmate Micah Sifry claimed "Ventura's vote leaned distinctly to the left," citing as evidence that 44 percent of Jesse voters called themselves liberal and meanwhile ignoring other key exit poll data, such as the fact that Ventura swiped significantly more votes from the Republican Coleman than the Democrat Humphrey.

Ventura's choices: abortion, brothels, executions, decriminalized drugs. In short, the new politics.

Better to say that Ventura brought out a lot of people who likewise might have been drawn to a left-leaning candidate. But if there is an overarching paradigm in the Jesse vote besides general alienation, it's the Regular Guy factor. We suspect a lot of the traditional non-voters who came out for Ventura are pretty much in synch with those who voted for Vroman, anti-elite with both right and left strains. Their numbers are large and growing. Then, too, there was in the Ventura camp a large number of previously uninvolved 18-29-year-olds who seized the chance to cast what can only be called an absurdist vote for the professional wrestler. (Say what you will about Gen Xers, but never underestimate their attachment to the ironic gesture.)

In a week or two the pundits and back-room strategists will probably settle on some version of Minnesota exceptionalism to explain Ventura, like Wellstone before him. This is a mistake; Wellstone's 1990 win was entirely left-populist in character, while Ventura presents a much more muddled picture. There's no making the two races add up to the same thing so far as voter predilections in the north country are concerned. The exceptional thing in each case was the campaign itself.

Two parallels stand out. First is the empathy factor. It mattered enormously that both Wellstone and Ventura used media and personal appearances to forge a sense of identification with those who feel excluded and often don't bother voting. The persona was the thing; "issues" as such were secondary. Which doesn't mean that voters didn't care about issues, only that speaking the language of policy tends to mark one as a wonk, part of the very establishment that the public wants nothing to do with. Second, both campaigns featured funny, unconventional TV and radio spots (conceived by the same man, Minneapolis ad master Bill Hillsman) that made the most of meager budgets by becoming stories in themselves and generating loads of free publicity.

In the end both campaigns were triumphs of populist spirit and smart, low-cost marketing. There's no reason at all their success can't be duplicated elsewhere. ■

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November 9, 1998

Dear Friend,

Here at CounterPunch hq we write to you in an optimistic frame of mind, albeit with our annual begging bowl firmly outstretched. It's the immediate aftermath of the elections. Never have more professional political soothsayers and tea-leaf readers of the small screen made bigger fools of themselves. On November 3 the voters smacked down elite opinion, George Will, David Broder, William Kristol, Sam Donaldson, Cokie Roberts and the rest of them. In a just world they'd lose their license to prattle.

Newt is gone. Many liberal outfits secretly mourn his passing. They've lost a fantastic fund-raiser. Many a dollar has been flushed from liberal wallets by the spectre of Newt the Beast. Here at CounterPunch we've never gone in for that kind of scaremongering, because our mission is to combine radicalism with realism when we report on the political scene. When it comes to beasts we are bipartisan.

In California it was good to see the Republican Dan Lungren, a sour-minded bigot and corporate flunky, go down in flames. But is Gray Davis, the new Democratic governor, less of a captive to the big powers in the state, in agriculture, aerospace, real estate, Silicon Valley? And Davis wants to execute 16 year olds just as Lungren did. On the East Coast, will Charles Schumer, hammer of the immigrants, the Justice Department's errand boy on forfeiture laws, be any less of a servant to Wall Street than Alfonse D'Amato? As we say here at CounterPunch, the right guys lost, and, for the most part, the wrong guys won. That's good for CounterPunch, because reporting what the wrong guys are up to is our mission.

We don't jam your mailbox with monthly pleas for money. Instead we confine ourselves to one serious request per annum. Here it is. We're proud to have given you CounterPunchers strong reporting and lively writing you won't find anywhere else.

• We broke the story of how Clinton's erstwhile real estate partner Jim McDougal died in a federal prison, vital medical care withheld. We followed up with the news that our informant, another prisoner, is now being maltreated as a result.

• We told how the nation's largest company, GM, has exploited and betrayed its minority dealers. We've been exploring the shameful role in this saga of Jesse Jackson, who has carried the ball for the car company.

• We've kept a sharp eye on the man most likely to be the Democrats' standard bearer in 2000, Al Gore. Last year we exposed him helping cover up the likely cause of Valu-jet's deadly crash in the Everglades. In July we found him sitting on his hands as strip-miners menaced the most cherished park in his home state of Tennessee. In October we caught him, like Bill Clinton, lying low as newly organized workers at Avondale, a US Navy contractor in Louisiana, battled for recognition of their union, while surviving on the lowest payscales in the industry and on foodstamps. So much for Al, labor's friend.

• We've kept, as always, our searchlight steadily trained on the giants of the American corporate sector, such as the oil companies. CounterPunch has exposed Unocal's plan to whitewash its conduct in Burma. Alone, we have charted Arco's successful leasing of the Clinton administration (most notably Bruce Babbitt's Interior Department) in one of the biggest oil scandals since Teapot Dome, the onslaught on Alaska's Arctic plain. So we reckon we've done a pretty good job.

Not so long ago one of our most loyal readers, Pete Seeger, urged us to report the good news for our side, the

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victories. We try to anyway, but we thank Pete for prodding us. And there have been triumphs. CounterPunch exposed the plan hatched by Louisiana governor Mike Foster and Shintech, the Japanese chemical giant, to build a toxic PVC plant in the largely black community of Convent. This fall such adverse publicity forced the company to abandon its schemes. After a CounterPunch story this spring, seized on by the major networks, the Navy decided not to dump its radioactive waste in Gary, Indiana. Our story stopped the Navy's nuclear train dead on its tracks. We kept the focus on Daryl Jones until this corrupt Florida legislator was forced to abandon his quest to become Secretary of the Air Force. The CIA's Inspector General grudgingly confirmed in October what we had been reporting for more than two years. Namely that the Carter/Reagan/Bush administrations knew that the leaders of the Contras were planning to ship cocaine to the US to raise money and the CIA abetted the plan.

One of the joys of putting out CounterPunch is the give and take between us and you. We get your tips and we do our best to follow them up. Lately two of the CounterPunch team, Alex and Jeffrey, have met many of you along the trail as we've been giving talks on our book *Whiteout*. To you, our friends out there, we must now underline that it costs a lot of money to put out a muckraking newsletter twice a month. As one old newspaper editor used to remind us, comment is free but facts are expensive. So this year, as in previous years, we ask you to help us make our budget. CounterPunch is five years old now and never yet have we raised our subscription price, even though our costs keep on rising.

We depend on you, our readers, to keep us going. There are no big handouts from Hollywood or from foundations like Rockefeller or Pew to keep the debt collectors from our door. We don't have to dance to anyone's tune, but the consequence is, we must ask you to get out your checkbook now, scan carefully the options below and contribute as much as you can. We need it to bring you CounterPunch for another exciting year.

Best wishes and thanks,

Ken Silverstein and Alexander Cockburn

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The Watchdog is the Fox

The Truth About That "Sweat Free" Label

A little more than two years ago Bill Clinton and Nike CEO Phil Knight embraced each other in a Rose Garden ceremony, celebrating the creation of the Apparel Industry Partnership. Clinton hailed the partnership as "an unprecedented coming together" of industry chieftains, labor groups, human rights watchdogs and churches to deal with the issue of labor practices in overseas factories. The event received reverential press coverage.

Clinton and Knight swore that the new partnership would swiftly bring the sweatshop controversy to a close with a new program of rigorous monitoring of factory conditions and child labor practices. Companies abiding by a "code of conduct" would be rewarded with a "No Sweat" label that they could stamp on their products to pacify the concerns of their consumers, whose agitation over the issue had begun to dent the bottom line of companies such as Nike.

After two years of internal squabbles, defections and debate, the partnership's plan has finally been completed. The details were released on November 2, election eve, amid scant attention from the media. It turns out this was precisely the objective of Arnold and Porter, the DC lobby shop hired to prepare and distribute the report. There were several reasons for this stealth approach. First, the atmosphere of objectivity and bipartisanship heralded by Clinton had long since been shattered by the defections of labor and church groups, leaving the partnership dominated by sweatshop moguls. Second, the report, which calls for the creation of the Fair Labor Association, doesn't survive serious scrutiny.

The partnership chose to ignore the thorniest issue, namely the need for companies to pay factory workers a living wage. This decision prompted the labor rep on the panel, UNITE, and its largest church group, Interfaith Council on Corporate Responsibility, to quit the partnership in fury. "How can they say it's humane treatment to pay Indonesian workers ten cents an hour, when it takes at least twenty cents an hour in income just to pay for the basic necessities of life, food, shelter, clothing and medicine", says Medea Benjamin, director of the San Francisco-based Global Exchange.

Similarly, the touchy subject of whether factory workers would have the right to organize was dealt with only in passing. According to the plan, members of the partnership have generously agreed to "not affirmatively seek the assistance of state authorities to prevent workers from exercising these rights." In other words, you can't be too loud in your request that the Indonesian military massacre your striking workers if you want that "No Sweat" label.

The companies themselves get off cheap. It will cost a maximum of $100,000 to join the Fair Labor Association, roughly what Nike pays Michael Jordan every day. Moreover, they get the Fair Labor Association to pony up the cost of the inspections of their factories. And how is the new Association going to be funded? Through government grants and contributions from private foundations.

Sweatshops will be given plenty of advance warning of visits by their own hand-picked inspectors.

Inspections of the factories don't look to be particularly onerous endeavors. For starters, only five per cent of the factories will be visited and, to help companies prepare for these inspections, they will be given plenty of advance warning. There will be no surprise visits. Nor will the inspectors be strangers. In most cases, the companies will be able to select their own. And, even more satisfying to corporate executives, the companies will be able to recommend which factories the inspectors will visit.

For years, groups such as Global Exchange have hammered away on the subject of disclosure, demanding that companies, such as Nike and Reebok, reveal the names and locations of their overseas factories. The human rights advocates lost on this issue as well. Indeed, most of the information generated by the partnership's plan will remain cloaked in secrecy. When the inspectors submit their report, it doesn't go to the partnership until after the company has had a chance to review it for at least 60 days. Then, in order to protect corporate secrets, the public is provided only with a highly redacted version of the report. Then it seems that the public will hear only good news about the company. By contrast, if a factory is found not to be in compliance with the "code of conduct", the companies can rest assured that "the public will not be informed of the determination".

Even more generously, the partnership decided that a company can be granted the coveted "No Sweat" label for a particular brand, even if 95 percent of its other products are manufactured under the most cruel sweatshop conditions.

The Clinton administration, especially Labor Secretary Alexis Herman, pushed hard for the task force to finish its work before the election, hoping for a last minute ceremony reuniting the President with Phil Knight. But upon review the plan was considered so weak that it was decided to slip the agreement out on election eve when it stood a good chance of being ignored by the press, which, in fact, it was.

The final document was largely drafted by lawyers for Nike and by Michael Posner, director of the New York-based Lawyers' Committee on Human Rights. If this sounds like a struggle between natural adversaries, think again. An examination of the board and executive committee members of the Lawyers' Committee scarcely discloses it as a mighty foe of corporate power. Instead, the committee's board is freighted with representives from the nation's biggest corporate law firms, including Patton, Boggs; Akin Gump; Skadden, Arp; Williams and Connolly; Arnold and Porter. Posner's group also hosts spots for some of the ugliest corporations on the block, including Lockheed Martin, GE, Philip Morris, Mitsubishi, Allied Signal, Morgan Stanley and Aetna Insurance, whose rep on the council is that violator of labor standards, Zoe Baird.

With sublime cheek, the Lawyer's Committee also invited onto its advisory council executives from several companies that employ sweatshop labor, including Reebok, The Gap, Liz Claiborne and the Walt Disney Company, which has profited off the services of Haitian workers laboring in conditions of near slavery. ■

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(**Mitch**, *continued from page 1)*
with dangerous consequences.

At the time he was driven out by revolution, Anastasio Somoza, propped up for years by the United States, owned 20 per cent of Nicaragua's farm land. In El Salvador 2 per cent of the population held 60 per cent of the farm land. The Sandinistas who evicted Somoza promptly embarked on efforts to redistribute land to the peasants. Nearly a third of Nicaraguan farm land was handed to more than 120,000 families, which amounted to more than half the country's peasant population. Such efforts at redistribution were sometimes patchy, particularly in the north, and state farms and rich farmers were favored at the expense of the campesinos.

But despite such mistakes, their efforts to revive forests and to restore the integrity of the land won the Sandinistas international acclaim. Not for long. The United States put an end to all that, driving the Sandinistas into an increasingly desperate state of siege. In El Salvador and Honduras death squads cut down rural organizers.

Take one example of US-sponsored sabotage of efforts to mend the land. The US volunteer Ben Linder was murdered by Contras who had been urged by CIA man Dewey Clarridge "to kill Cubans". When he met his death, Linder was working on a small hydroelectric project at El Cua designed to give the campesinos the ability to generate power, thus not to be forced to cut down trees for fuel.

So, for years now, those worn hillsides and floodplains through Central America have been awaiting Mitch. According to a US government study, over 4.5 million acres of degraded land currently under agricultural use in Central America are in need of immediate reforestation. Even in the 1980s storms were inflicting $40 to $50 million in damage each year in the region because of flooding and consequent damage to infrastructure. In the highland regions of El Salvador and Guatemala the land is in even sorrier shape than in Honduras and Nicaragua before the onslaught of hurricane Mitch. The only way forward is for the peasants to be given good agricultural land and adequate financial resources. That's even less likely now than it was in 1954.

"Structural adjustment" forced by the First World left Honduras and Nicaragua defenseless.

Humans caused the disaster just as humans made sure that the governments of Nicaragua and Honduras were incapable of responding to the catastrophe. Peter Rosset, of Food First and co-author of the newly revised World Hunger: Twelve Myths, stresses to us that "after a decade of 'structural adjustment' imposed by the World Bank, the IMF and USAID, these governments are hollow shells, mutilated by enforced cutbacks. Comes a hurricane and how can you begin evacuation if there's no money for gasoline, no vehicles, skeleton staffs, no vaccines, not even the ability to stockpile drinking water? How can you battle epidemics when the ministries of health have been decimated? How can you rebuild when the ministries of works have been similarly cut back?"

So the Honduran government didn't put the country on alert. There was no effort to muster sandbags, plan evacuations, organize back-up power supplies. The government simply hoped the hurricane would go away. After structural adjustment, that's about all it could do. As Rosset puts it "It's not even a question, in Nicaragua, of Aleman being right or left. In fact, he's a rightwing fascist, but anyway his hands were already tied and his legs chopped off." Honduras has sustained $1 billion worth of damage to basic infrastructure, and thus far as got $16 million in aid.

A couple of years ago hurricane Lili struck Cuba. The government had evacuated thousands, stockpiled sandbags, positioned back-up generators, rallied medics. When Lili moved away, thousands of homes had been destroyed but less than half a dozen lives lost. Just recently the right-wing President Aleman of Nicaragua refused offers of help from Fidel Castro, making disparaging remarks about Cuba's political system, and saying, incredibly, that Nicaragua needed even greater disciplines of the free market to recover from the disaster. There's a bleak truth Aleman and many others should reflect upon: "natural" disasters are nature's judgment on what humans have wrought. ■

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